

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard
Matthew 20:1-16
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Matthew 20:1-16 follows the account of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22, Jesus' teaching on the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom of God in Matthew 19:23-26 and His teaching on the reward of sacrifice in Matthew 19:27-29. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard illustrates Jesus' point about the reward for those who follow Jesus.

Matthew 20 provides for an unfortunate chapter break in the teaching of Jesus about riches and reward. This is part of Jesus' response to Peter's question in Matthew 19:27 that began in verse 28 and continued until Matthew 20:16. This parable is only found in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 19:30, "*But many who are first will be last; and the last, first*" is restated at the end of this parable in Matthew 20:16, "*So the last shall be first, and the first last.*" So then the summary statement that Jesus made in his response to Peter is illustrated in the parable of the laborers. This summary effectively bookends the parable.

The hiring of the laborers (20:1-7)

This parable describes what "*the kingdom of heaven is like,*" which is the normal phrase that Jesus uses to introduce His parables. In this case, the story centers around a landowner who hired various laborers to work in his vineyard. Other parables related to people working in a field or vineyard, such as the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-9), the parable of the tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32), and the parable of the landowner (Matthew 21:33-46).

The landowner has work to be done in his vineyard and he sought out certain day laborers to work for him. He ultimately hires five different groups of laborers for his vineyard and the initial group is hired "*early in the morning*" or at the same time as the early dawn. This was the normal time when a person would agree to work, since in the agricultural society of first century Palestine, the normal work day was about ten hours (not including breaks in the workday), or between sunrise and sunset. This would have therefore been as early as around 6:00 in the morning. The normal place that such laborers would have been hired would be in the common, centrally located marketplace (cf. 20:3) where various types of business would be conducted.

These initial laborers agreed to work for the going rate of one denarius for the day. Not only was this the prevailing wage, but they would have been happy to have employment for the day. This agreement takes the form of a contract, which is why the landowner can say to them, *“did you not agree with me for a denarius?”* in verse 13.

There is no reason given why the first group of workers were insufficient and more were required. Whether the work to be done was far greater than one group could do, whether the owner hired everyone available in the early morning, whether the man misjudged the work to be done or whether the first group of workers were less productive than expected, is beside the point of the parable.

The second group of laborers were hired at *“about the third hour,”* or about 9:00 a.m. These workers were described as *“standing idle in the market place.”* They were available for work, but nothing had come their way. Because of this, they were willing to work without the same fixed agreement as the initial workers had agreed to, with only the words *“You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give to you.”* In light of their need for work to earn a living, they responded to the landowner, *“And so they went”* since they would be happy simply to be hired.

The landowner returned to the market place again in the sixth hour, about noon, and in the ninth hour, about 3:00 p.m. and hired two more groups of laborers in the same way and with the same agreement to pay them whatever is right. Obviously, the landowner knew he would be generous and the laborers would be happy, but these laborers also had no clear understanding of what they would be paid.

Finally, the fifth and last group of laborers was hired at *“about the eleventh hour.”* The eleventh hour was near the end of the work day, with about an hour left before the daylight would end. This would correspond to roughly 5:00 p.m. Certainly, there was very limited time for them to do any productive work in the vineyard for the landowner. Unlike the others, there was no discussion about payment.

When the landowner went to the market place and found this group, they were like the previous groups, *“standing around.”* The laborers explain that the reason they are standing around idle was *“Because no one hired us.”* Possibly the landowner had passed them over for hiring on his previous visits to the market place. But this is not significant since regardless, they had been waiting without work for a long period of time. Their need for work was so great that they were willing to continue to wait even with very little time to be hired. Even though this fifth group of laborers had been passed over the entire day, they are sent to work in the vineyard alongside the others groups. Probably they had not been hired because they were the least appealing workers to potential employers.

The payment of the laborers (20:8-15)

Far more surprising that the landowner making five visits to hire workers even late into the day is his payment of the laborers for their work. Those hired later could have only expected to receive a proportional share of what the first group of laborers would receive.

Just as the first half of this parable describes the first and the last group of laborers in more detail, the second half of the parable focuses on the first and last group. This should be expected since it is the first group of laborers that would have the biggest issue with the apparent inequity of payment with the last group of laborers.

When the evening came, the owner ordered his foreman to pay the laborers, *“beginning with the last group to the first.”* This was intentional in order for the first group of laborers to be aware of the amount that the landowner had paid to the last group of laborers. Some have viewed the evening as being the judgment but this would be the normal time payment would have been made for the day’s work.

The group hired in the eleventh hour came and *“each one received a denarius.”* Certainly they would have been very pleased with this unexpected, generous payment for their brief work. Yet this is not stated, for the focus will be on the first group instead.

The first group of laborers would naturally assume the landowner would be equally generous with them, for they had worked much longer than any of the other groups. When they received the denarius as promised, *“they grumbled at the landowner.”* Their argument in favor of why they should have been paid more included (1) the disparity of the length of the work put in and (2) the difficulty of the work they had done. They had worked all day, not just one hour and they had *“borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.”*

This response is very typical of the workers who have their own sense of what is fair. Today, workers compare their efforts with other workers and very commonly view themselves as being underpaid and overworked. Yet this first group was not looking at their situation only from a position of personal bias, but by any measure, they worked dramatically more and were paid the same. Laborers today would be sympathetic to these objections.

The main complaint of the workers was that of equality. It was not regarding their personal need, or their satisfaction with the agreement they made, but rather that the other group(s) had been preferred over them. Their issue was more personal than it was economic.

The landowner gave a very mild, kind retort to the first group of laborers. His approach was friendly and appealed to reason, *“Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?”* There could be no argument for they had indeed agreed to the terms of the work. The landowner had not wronged them and they could understand this.

Furthermore, the landowner acknowledged his generosity toward the other groups, but argued that he was entitled to do what he wanted to do with his money, *“Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?”* There could be no disagreement with this point either. The money was his and he was within his right to be generous if he so chose to. They should accept their payment and depart.

Finally, the landowner raised the issue of their jealousy over what others were paid when he said, *“Or is your eye envious because I am generous.”* The literal reading of the Greek text is, *“Or is your eye evil because I am good.”* While the meaning of this does point to jealousy (*“do you begrudge my generosity”* ESV), it also points back to Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler, when He said, *“There is only one who is good”* (Matthew 19:17). The landowner, symbolic of the Lord (even called *“lord of the vineyard”* in verse 8), is good in the sense that he has acted with generosity over the undeserving.

This was the crux of their problem, they were envious of the pay that other workers received. In his concern for the first group, he even addressed their real problem, which was their envious eye. Earlier Jesus taught about the problem of the sin of the eye, *“The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”* (Matthew 6:22-23).

The landowner is clearly representative of God in this parable. These rhetorical questions show that God will distribute to His servants according to His generous prerogative. He is just in His dealings, and His graciousness is not earned by the works of men. We can trust God’s goodness, as manifested by His grace, rather than calculating what God owes us.

Paul reminds us of this truth of God’s sovereign prerogatives to do according to His desires because God is the Creator and we are not *“You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?”* (Romans 9:19-20). God is righteous in His choices and no man can complain about His lovingkindness to anyone.

The principle regarding the laborers (20:16)

The conclusion of this parable, “*So the last shall be first, and the first last.*” is a restatement of the words that introduced this parable in Matthew 19:30. However, these two verses are not identical. First, there is a reversal of the statement, where the order of the last and the first are switched.

Matthew 19:30: But many *who are* first will be last; and *the* last, first.

Matthew 20:16: So the last shall be first, and the first last.

The significance of this reversal lies in the context of what it summarizes. In Matthew 19:30, the first would be the prominent, wealthy people such as the rich young ruler and the last would be the disciples who left everything to follow Jesus. Hence, this is an encouragement to the disciples. In Matthew 20:16, the last were those who labored only one hour but received the same pay (cf. “last” in 20:8, 12). Those who are last are the same as the first in 20:16. In other words, Matthew 19:30 puts the first as last in the sense of a demotion, whereas Matthew 20:16 puts the last as first in the sense of equality.

Also, Matthew 19:30 includes the word “*many*,” which leaves open the sense that there are a few who are first who will not be last. However, Matthew 20:16 makes this statement more categorical. So, it seems that Matthew 19:30 makes a statement about how many of the first in position will be removed from that position and put into the last position. This is in the sense of what Jesus said in Matthew 23:12, “*Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*”

Matthew 20:16 omits the word “*many*” and appears to make a summary statement about the reward of all the laborers. God will recompense His servants regardless of the amount of time they have spent working on His behalf. Thus there is an equality of reward in service to God, for those who arrived to work last receive the same as those who arrived to work first.

This could appear contradictory to what Jesus had taught about His disciples sitting “*upon the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” in Matthew 19:28. It may also seem opposed to Paul’s words about the believer’s reward in 1 Corinthians 3:14-15, “*If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire*” (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10). Jesus also taught in the parable of money usage about different rewards for different people (Luke 19:11-27; cf. Matthew 25:14-30).

This can be understood as our faithfulness with our opportunities, rather than the sum total of our productivity. We each have our unique opportunities with the time, abilities, and resources that the Lord has given us. Those who have had great opportunities, will be judged according to their faithfulness, just as those with limited opportunities. Those who have been followers of Christ for decades will obviously have more opportunities for service than those who have been followers of Christ for weeks. Therefore, there is justice in the Lord's reward for the believers in Christ.

Because the parable presents both the first and the last as receiving the same reward, this leads to the conclusion that this reward is eternal life. This fits the context leading to this parable, where Jesus says that the reward of everyone who has left people and things of the sake of His name *"will inherit eternal life"* (Matthew 19:29). Mark 10:30 phrases this reward as *"and in the age to come, eternal life."*

Eternal life is granted to all God's people, regardless of when they come to faith. While the disciples were the first followers of Jesus, everyone who comes after them in following Jesus by leaving people and things for His name sake, will inherit eternal life. This reward is the same, regardless of the length of service. James would be the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:2) while his brother, John, would outlive the other apostles. They both will receive eternal life. Likewise, *"everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters of father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life."* This clearly refers to not only the apostles, but every true believer in Christ throughout time.

This summary stands as a corrective to Peter's perspective that he and the other disciples were deserving of a greater reward for having left everything to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:27). The disciples will judge the twelve tribes of Israel, but everyone who has left people and things for Christ's sake will receive many times as much, and will, like the disciples, inherit eternal life.

This is all the result of the grace of God, for Jesus said to the disciples, *"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit"* (John 15:16). Their fruitfulness was appointed by Jesus, not from themselves. Nevertheless, later in Matthew 20 we will see James and John coming to Jesus with their mother to ask for greater preference (20:20-23) and we also see the other disciples becoming indignant with the two brothers (20:24). They continued to be slow to learn the meaning of Christ's teaching.

Conclusion

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard teaches us that the Lord is gracious to all who respond to His offer to come and labor for Him. There is no difference in regard to when someone responds to His sovereign call. Like the laborers, each of us has no other option until the Lord calls us and without His call, we are destined to be left in our sin and destruction. The only reason we have any reward is because the Lord has called us in the first place.

Because our work for the Lord is according to His sovereign calling, we can never demand some adequate recompense in comparison to anyone else. We have no true ability to correctly evaluate the service of others and we are certainly biased toward ourselves. Since we are all totally dependent upon God's grace to redeem us and we are unable to judge what a proper distribution of reward would be, we must trust our Lord for His wisdom for what He has stored up for us.

Another corollary implication of this parable in its context is that people will not necessarily be rewarded according to either their expectations or the expectations of others. Heaven will bring some surprises for our value system is tainted by worldly thinking and a clear lack of knowledge regarding the heart of man. Humility is essential when making any pronouncements about God's reward of any individual.

Nevertheless, we know that God is just and gracious, and can be fully trusted. Jesus has told us that everyone who has sacrificed relationships and possessions for His name's sake will be rewarded far more than what they may have had otherwise. We can be greatly encouraged that God gives good gifts to those who love him and that there is no greater joy than the gift of eternal life, dwelling in God's presence for eternity.

There is therefore no reason for any concern. In the words of Jesus, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:1-3).